

Page 1

I arrived at as an undergraduate at WITS with 2 driving passions: a consuming interest for a politics of justice grounded in a Christian theology -

and acting, as a `revelation of the treasures of the human soul` either in grief or joy and not as a form of exhibitionism of my individual talents to become a Star, in the Hollywood sense where a star is in economic terms a `form of capital strategically employed in order to create profit`.

Where did these 2 passions germinate?

On an individual level- right there in the context of my own home life - my search for justice grew out of the pain I experienced when I saw the ridicule that my malformed brother elicited from people around him- and of course the torment that this caused him.

I became aware of the evil that is prejudice - which is a dimension of INJUSTICE.

My brother represented someone OTHER , the person who did not conform to the usual and/or acceptable shape.

My urge to redress this injustice , fight this prejudice , took a more social dimension during my years as a boarder at ST Dominic`s Convent, the same school where the great and saintly Barbara Hogan also matriculated a year later than me - though I only got acquainted with her at WITS.

The noble Catholic priests and nuns were prepared to sacrifice their lives for a non-Marxist Christ centred liberation theology against the evil that was apartheid- the system of denigration and repression of people who did not resemble us whites but were from OTHER skin colourations and cultures. The NUNS lead by example.

At the same time my attraction to drama and acting was reinforced by participating in SCHOOL plays , LOCAL eistedfords etc. In my final year I impressed with a non-verbal performance in a tableau called Taboo- and it was suggested that I should go to drama school.

So I arrived at WITS politicized , and with a hidden passion for drama and acting -a profession deeply frowned on by the conservative immigrant Greek community in which I grew up.

Studying Politics officially as a subject alerted my antennae to what was happening among the anti-apartheid activists. There were continual rumblings of unrest. Siswe Banzi was being performed in one of the lecture halls , Nadine Gordimer was giving talks.

My contact with Barbara Hogan was accidental as she was more interested in Social anthropology- I remember her always smiling , being a gentle kind soul. In my second year she told me that she had to go away. Later in my life I read that she had joined the ANC and had been incarcerated for 20 years. But I cannot believe that she believed in violence as a tool for change. She was probably incarcerated for being a `communist` , in those days that word meant anyone who opposed `

Apartheid` and believed in an equal and just society for all , as opposed to being caught perpetrating a violent act.

I too had my ` communist` moment. A photo of me standing at picket line on the WITS side of Jan Smuts avenue during one of the protests , appeared in the `STAR` .

The local MP from the Nationalist Party Boksburg constituency saw it and made an ominous call to my parents `I did`nt know that your daughter was communist!` and put the phone

Page 2

down on them. With one tragedy already in a vulnerable family unit , I could not be responsible to inflict any more anxiety , fear and hurt so I gave up the study of politics – my great passion and in which I excelled , and continued with a philosophy MAJOR.

Though I had given up politics as a study , the political discussions continued, so that when I met the great George Bizos , one of Mandela`s staunchest allies and lawyers , as well as one of the framing lawyers of the constitution of the new South Africa , he nicknamed me ` I`enfant terrible ` precisely because of my continued concern to bring about a change to the status quo- a kind of Socratic gadfly.

Apart from the greatness of Bizos for his role as a great lawyer in the fight against apartheid, defending Mandela etc etc , he also manifested a genius in his role as a leading member of the conservative South African Greek community by pointing out the parallels between the 400 years of slavery that Greece had suffered under the Ottoman Turks and the 300 years or so of repression and cruelty suffered by the Southern African black tribes and mixed race people under the British and then under the Nationalist Afrikaner rule, and by referring to this parallel he was able to balance his fight for justice in South Africa , and still lead the very conservative Greek community in a more progressive direction.

All during this time as a WITS student I had not forgotten about my hidden passion for drama and acting. I studied for drama qualifications on an ex-curricular course , and dazzled with a volcanic performance of SaLOME in a open afternoon session organised by my Politics Tutor..

My God` I just loved the act of performing, of forcing the audience into a state of ` suspension of disbelief` and entering into my reality.`

I continued my studies at WITS with a Honours course in English Literature discovering the greatness of the Jacobean tragedies and the 20th century greats like Beckett , and this only increased my hunger to perform, so that at after graduation I decided to go to Cape Town Drama School , where one of my class mates was the inimitable REZA de WET ,an intellectual aristocrat, a political and moral liberal , without prejudices , and who has gone on to become one of South Africa`s greatest Afrikaans language dramatists.

Reza represented a puncturing of the cliché that all Afrikaans people at the time were racists and bigots . Rubbish! There existed Afrikaans

people who detested the evil of the Afrikaner Nationalist party , and were pained by the cruelties and repressions inflicted on people of OTHER colour by the Nationalist Government.

Also and very importantly Cape Town Drama School had the moral vision to take on students of OTHER races , and one of them was, and is the Indian actor Vincent Ibrahim, who has now become very successful in the UK..

At the end of my Cape Town course I realised that there was no place for me in South Africa as it existed at that time , not only because I found it difficult to function as an individual in the society that considered 75 % of population as inferior, that my Greek community frowned on me as an actress, but also because my beliefs for a just non-racial society had now incorporated a fight for the equality for women – an anathema to the undeveloped conservative Greek community in which I had my social being.

I did not want to spend my life apologising for who and what I was.

Page 3

Arrival in the Uk.

The delusion that many visitors to the Uk bring with them is that it is the most politically advanced and civilized country in the World. It was a shock to discover that it is NOT! There was racial prejudice against people of colour, against people who came from Cyprus, from Ireland , from Italy.. etc. And as far as I was concerned the ruling elites had no real concern for the quality of life of the bottom half of the population. I worked for a marxist Greek Cypriot theatre company Theatro Technis in North London , where the issues of prejudice against immigrants, the poor, the illiterate were dramatised , and more urgently the exploration of the war crime that constituted the illegal invasion by the Turkish military of CYPRUS, and for which the USA (especially the diabolical Kissinger) and the UK had little concern , as the president of Cyprus was the Orthodox Archbishop Makarios, who had the reputation of being a bit of a red.

This was a theatre company that practised political theatre in its purest form!

I found myself performing a Greek Cypriot peasant woman driven from her land in the North of Cyprus and expressing her grief at the loss of her home in front of an audience that included refugees who had suffered the same fate but had managed to escape to London.

The tears just flowed naturally.

It was also at this theatre that I tackled the Mount Everest of acting parts – MEDEA by Euripides , and which I performed to great reviews and was the performance that put me on the London map as an actress. The whole play was interpreted politically.

MEdea represented the unwanted and disposable OTHER in the comfortable and cozy Greek society that the feckless Jason brings her to. She is abused and discarded.

I played her as a volcanic barefooted Anna Magnani.

The music was provided by the Pula Commune , and Io and behold , who was the drummer – but Molephe Peto – an ANC activist from South Africa whom George Bizos had helped escape prosecution .

Other great parts in politicized Greek tragedies followed- one of them included IO in `PROMETHEUS BOUND` the profoundest drama ever written as far as I am concerned, and set in military Junta Greece of the 1970s .

Working at Theatro Technis brought home to me that all art has an ethical and political dimension , and all actors and actresses should question why they are participating in the play to which they are giving their heart , soul and mind to .

But it was a company committed to a political theatre using basically Cypriot actors in the UK to bring about change in the UK Cypriot community and political change in Cyprus itself.

It was not the theatre that crossed racial or cultural barriers, that was capable of performing the great world dramas concerned with the great moral dilemmas that confront a human being , with actors and actresses from different race groups , with differing accents- which was my ultimate aim.

Nowadays unfortunately Theatro Technis has become a highly priced venue out for hire, used by international companies , including visiting companies from Greece funded by the cultural department of the Greek Embassy. The Purity has gone

Page 4 ;

My first tentative efforts in creating my New theatre company was mounting John` Ford`s `Tis Pity She`s a Whore` , which had inspired me during my Honours year at WITS.

I asked people for money for my production , even as I found myself canvassing for another cause .

This production was not the totally multi-racial cast that I had hoped for , but did consist of actors from other cultures and differing accents, and also achieved a very high level of production value and rave reviews. It also provided the springboard for the extremely talented director/ designer couple Declan Donnellan and Nicolas Ormerod , who went onto create the now world famous Cheek by Jowl company.

Empowered by my ability as a producer by this success I could now begin to create the theatre that would really break the taboos on mono white race casting , mono cultural casting – that was the usual formula of performance for the classical plays- the plays that are eternal in their message to man- and woman –kind.

It was at this time that I approached the great ATHOL FUGard to be a patron of my NEW company. Other patrons included the Head of the Minority Arts association. One great theatre personage who declined was the great Joan Littlewood whom I met by accident on the Tube.

The play chosen to incarnate this new multi-racial and multi-accented presentation of a great classic – was Jean Genet's THE BALCONY. A Prophetic choice, as the play is set in a Paris that is in turmoil with rioting, just as London at this point of time was being torched during the Brixton riots, an explosion of the racial tensions that had been simmering for some time as a result of the SAS laws, thwarted potentials etc etc . The Balcony explored the Escape from the repressive social realities to the opiate and sexual palliatives provided by the HOUSE of ILLUSION.

Set in Paris in the 1930`s it fitted the mold perfectly as The Stage`s critic pointed out .

I insisted on the casting of a Afro-Caribbean actress to play the lead role Irma the Madam of the Brothel , Americans, French, German , Indian , mixed race actors who could have easily have lived in the demi-monde of 1930→ Paris.

It was a great success and the door started opening.

Black actors saw a lead role in a great European classic played by a fellow black actress in a part initially written by Genet for a Caucasian actress. And tackling Genet`s text might be considered as even more difficult than Shakespeare, or Greek tragedy.

I , too benefited from playing Carmen , as one of the people who came to see the Balcony was the great film director, Nicolas Roeg , who then cast me in his film of Roald Dahl`s THE WITCHES.

-----EL CAMPO – Internationalist Theatre`s next play was written by the Argentinian playwright Griselda Gambaro , who had been hounded out of her native Argentina by the Junta and was now living in Spain , opened on the day That Writers International were remembering the writers banned in their own countries.-----

As Micheline Wandor previewed `Internationalist theatre was pursuing a policy of multi-national and multi-racial casting`. An American, A South African Greek, and a UK black actor.

Page 5

EL CAMPO could have easily been a dramatisation of the degradation of what happened to the people arrested by the SA Nationalist Security FORCES , detained without trial in a SA prison, and not only the degradation of a Jewish musician in a nazi prison camp, or on a parallel level an Argentinian artist degraded by the junta. A performance was seen by Ken Livingstone , ex-mayor of London, but then part of the Greater London Council`s arts panel, and Internationalist Theatre was for the first time granted public funds for its following production , and in due course became a registered charity. It was during the performance of EL CAMPO that I was offered a part in a Lindsay Anderson film , but had to decline due to conflicting time schedules.

The production received stunning reviews ,which included an interview with the Spanish language BBC Latin American Service. People came to see it twice.

This was great political theatre that crossed countries, cultural barriers and had a multi-racial cast.

ADAM SMALL

All this time I was keeping my eye on the developments in South Africa. I had always had a particular soft spot for the people who were at that time known as SA`s `Cape Coloureds` as I considered them as the most neglected and abandoned of all the dispossessed in the then SA. Now they are just mixed race persons.

I had chosen one of the great Adam Small`s poems to recite at a poetry afternoon at Cape Town Drama School. And I was keen to make contact with him, as he was the best exponent of the plight and tragedy of his own people forced to live in the margins of society.

I met him and his wife in London, had a pleasant lunch, discussed my company performing one of his plays but nothing came of it.

But what we also discussed, and was very important, was the defining role that the British Colonial rule had in scarring the Afrikaans peoples` psyche by treating them with `apartheid` type prejudices and cruelties `that the Afrikaans ruling elites , and practised to a large degree by the Afrikaans people who were indoctrinated with a paranoia as a threatened people- against SA`s peoples of other races etc .

Apparently during British Colonial rule of SA there were signs similar to those displayed in British Colonial India : `NO DOGS and NO COOLIES`, only in SA `NO DOGS and NO BOERS`.

And of course the British were the first to create `Concentration camps` in which Many Boere mothers and children died from starvation.

The British were also the first to formulate the IDEA of separate ghetto states called `KAFFIRISTANS`. It is all documented in the historical archives in Grahamstown UNIVERSITY.

When we talk about the evils of Afrikaans Nationalist Apartheid policies, most of the world chooses to forget about the British role in all of this. The White systematic slaughter of the indigenous populations of the North American continent is probably worse of a crime than Nationalist Party apartheid- and right now as we speak a very great crime is being perpetrated against the 200, million Indian Dallits on that subcontinent. The Dallits are the `untouchables`, the living `sewers`, the people who carry the faecal matter from each household to the landfills in the parts of India that have no public sewage plumbing system.

Page 6

The word `Dallit` I was told by an Anglican Pastor etymologically means the `one who suffers` and also the one of a `darker skin` and Brahmin the one who has a `lighter skin` - can you believe it!!!!!!!

INDIA FOR All of its meretricious economic boom needs to wake up to this CURRENT tragedy!

I am not going through the whole history of Internationalist Theatre , but pinpointing the seminal moments of its development. It`s first production was performed in September 1981 and the company continued into the 90`s

The ground breaking production of the company, which was basically run by one person, me, from a bedsit in St John`s Wood and required 18 hours of work a day , and the point at which the cross cultural and multi-racial casting began to bite , was the production of Brecht`s great anti-war play - MOTHER COURAGE.

The part of the Pastor was played by the well known Indian actor Renu Setna.

Just one comment/question in the review by the then free-lance critic of TIME OUT , Malcolm Hay (later to become a full member of TIME out for the next 20 years) jolted us into the consciousness that we were making history.

And what was the comment/question?

`Why is an Indian actor playing the role of the Pastor?`

Audience`s were used to seeing productions of German classical plays like Mother Courage

with Caucasian actors and Renu just playing Indians only in Indian roles.

I went to the Drama Editor of TIME OUT , Anna McFerran and requested her to remove this review from Time OUT for the rest of the run of the play , as we found it offensive, and racist.

Another instance that the establishment was riled, is the reaction of a leading casting director Irene Lamb in a telephone conversation with one of the cast, named Joe Figg:

`WHY IS SHE (that is me) DOING THIS?`

The word spread around. I went for a TV audition and the director commented that he had heard that this tiny actress had organised a production of Mother Courage which was making waves.

And I replied `That`s me`.

The casting clichés had been thrown out of the window.

Actors are People , and it is their talent that counts. Today this type of casting is common place , BUT IT HAD TO BE FOUGHT FOR.

Furthermore Internationalist Theatre`s MOTHER COURAGE production could not be dismissed as some amateur dramatics as it was being directed by ex-RSC director Peter Stevenson, and a director whom the great John Barton - a stalwart of the RSC - often asked to be his collaborator on many productions.

MISS JULIE was not a multi-racial production, but a puncturing of Ethnic casting clichés.

Both in the UK and the USA actors from ethnic Caucasian minorities had changed their Jewish, Italian , Greek , Eastern European surnames to fit the acceptable casting mold.

Kirk Douglas, Tony Curtis, Clara Bow, Merle Oberon, Jennifer Anniston who has a Greek father, the list goes on and on- except for the great Barbara Streisand, who refused to also have the surgery .

Page 7

It took Elia Kazan , Coppola , Scorsese to use Italian USA actors and bring them into the USA mainstream. And then we had the Afro -American revolution - Denzel Washinton , Hallie Berry - the surnames sound changed but it is a revolution..

In the UK the renowned Greek/UK stage actress Katerina Hadjipateras changed her name to Kathryn Hunter so that her surname did not obstruct her getting intelligent parts and not being asked to play an ethnic cliché. Well my surname was Rockas, and Rockas it had remained.

Some people thought it was Spanish , or French ?

Well it was unheard of that a short, dark haired ethnic actress of Greek temperament (though born in SA) would ever had the audacity to play the aristocratic Miss Julie. Not beautiful or tall enough etc etc.

Well the blonde and beautiful Sandra Prinsloo the renowned SA actress had come to perform Miss Julie at the Roundhouse, with Jean played by a black SA actor - but had failed to impress.

The point of puncturing the expected clichés is that my Miss Julie was going to explore the depths of inner turmoil that a confused upbringing had inflicted on Miss Julie by being brought up as a man by her militaristic father and basically had been much neglected. Her burgeoning sexually is deeply touched by the primal Jean and brought out the woman in her. The communist newspaper MORNING Star`s reviewer was sussed enough to perceive the intention of my performance and its theatrical incarnation and disregarded my shortness etc etc.

And for the Stage it proved to be one of the best productions of Miss Julie ever seen in London. Michael Meyer the authoritative translator of Strindberg`s Miss Julie also came and enthused. Greek Titanic passions had created a `Walpurgis Nacht` of moving proportions.

ENEMIES by MAXIM Gorky too had great social and political resonance. When I submitted the play to the director/manager of the theatre venue Ann Pennington she was so bowled over that she insisted that my company could not present it unless she directed it, and it was a co-production.

The timing of this performance proved as prophetic as that of THE BALCONY.

ENEMIES explored the simmering revolt of the suppressed exploited masses of Russian surfs against their land owning masters , and the inaction of the elites to do anything about it.

In the UK the miners were fighting against exploitation , and to save their mines against closure.

I took the political importance one step further – I invited the London cultural attaché of the then Soviet Union of Russia to the performance. And a whole group of them came. And they were just people like ourselves, and not THE OTHER that had been drummed into us as the great menace . This was an exercise in pre-glastnost Internationalist Theatre style, in fact a la Angelique Rockas style as I had not told anyone about it in advance.

Again this production earned great reviews and played to packed houses.
The racial barriers had started crumbling, the casting practices had cracked, and now the political walls! A Moral Victory!

Page 8

IMPACT

Internationalist Theatre only performed in London.

The Productions demanded attention as my company was getting directors who had already worked at the Royal Court, The Royal Shakespeare Company to direct plays with multi-racial casts , and that the theatrical product was of a very good standard, and furthermore that many prominent members of the arts establishment – Lindsay Anderson, Cameron MacKintosh, John Barton, Richard Eyre, the great casting director Mary Selway, Stephen Berkoff, Nicolas Roeg, came to see performances by Internationalist Theatre.

The seriousness with which the productions were presented encouraged actors of non anglo-saxon non caucasian origin to take hearty, be bold like I had been bold, to present themselves as artists first, as persons with talent, and only secondarily as actors coming from a specific ethnic group, specific colour, to tear away the clichéd perception of themselves .

Furthermore Internationalist Theatre also managed to get actors to work for it that had already a certain standing , like Renu Setna, Milos Kirek (from Czechia), Okon Jones, Ellen Thomas, Margaret Robinson, and Garry Cooper who was a bit of a celebrity as a result of his role in the Cult film Quadrophenia. On the final night of Miss Julie we received a standing ovation , I suspect mainly from his fans.

Other companies started copying our casting policies. Previously there were black companies doing black themed plays, Indian companies doing Indian themed plays. Now companies moved out of this comfort zone. Even the Internationalist Theatre manifesto was copied by at least 2 companies that I know.

Its influence spread and spread. Today you might even get a WEST end play cast trans-racially.

Internationalist Theatre apart from differing races , also tried to incorporate within its casts members of other faiths , different ideologies, different accents, poor actors, rich actors.

The only actors that the company did not manage to include is physically challenged people like my brother was.

Our greatest supporters were audiences drawn from the ethnic minorities who had been excluded from performing in the classic repertoire, the intelligentsia who wanted to see tough intellectual European plays, casting directors who were curious to see what this audacious little South African Greek actress was doing to upset the status quo, and of course students who were paying very low prices to see 3 hour drama classics that could impact on your consciousness, might trigger a new thought in a new moral direction.
First nights offered free tickets.

My identity as SA born is inextricably linked to part of my identity today. I still have my old SAFTU card that is accompanied with a letter stating that my membership will be renewed on coming to SA for a performance. I still connect with my SA agent Moonyeem Lee. I am still a SA domicile, and have SA inheritance. In my Will I have made BREadline Africa, one of the beneficiaries of this SA inheritance, as they deal with the problems that confront that once again segment of forgotten people, even the New SA society - the disposed people of MIXED race - that the great Adam Small wrote about in the past.

Page 9

As an actress today I work in the UK, and Greece, and now have even been offered work in Eastern Europe where there are many budding film directors. I have an agent in the USA etc.

What do I think about the New SA?

Is one man, one vote - freedom?

The tragic realization is that the achievement of `one man, one vote` still leaves 60% of the

Population living on, or below the breadline- hungry!!!!

. `Democracy` is not only `freedom to` express your political opinion. It is also `freedom from` - want, hunger, right to work. The concept of liberal democracy has been further devalued because it is aligned to laissez-faire capitalism- the type of capitalism that has currently brought western economies to the brink of collapse- hedge-fund mechanisms to make money from people's miseries, Americano and Anglo banks loaning money to poor people when they were fully cognisant that the debt could never be repaid. The western world is not ruled democratically, but bankocratically in close association with a small political elite.

When the great Mandela met Margaret Thatcher what was the topic of conversation?

If the ANC were willing not to rock the existing financial status quo and let the western banks carry on as usual- only they - the banks - would change their allegiance from Botha to Mandela and the ANC and Apartheid was dismantled.

All the bloodshed of freedom fighters, incarcerations for 20 years etc !!!!!!!!!!!

One WITS student that was in my politics class and had later joined the ANC , Jeanette Curtis had been murdered by the Security forces ,even though she had been forced to flee to Botswana!!!!!!

And who in this bankocracy and small political elite is now going to help the SA poor????

The same economic tragedy has now befallen the other country of my heart - Greece.

Last Question

Multi-racial theatre productions in SA?

The question is not multi-racial casts in a play that has been written with roles specifically designed for a multi-racial cast.

The real question is whether the current SA arts establishment is willing to produce a Shakespeare , a Greek play, Brecht , Gorky with cast made up of black African , Caucasian African , Chinese African , Mixed race African actors.

Apparently these types of dramas in the new SA are considered Eurocentric , not relevant. This is short sighted. In Nigeria - great classical black Nigerian actors can be seen playing Oedipus Rex.

Why can't there be a multiracial South African performance not only one of the established European world classics, but of a Brazilian play, of a Chinese classic , after all the Chinese Empire is playing a greater and greater role in the current Southern African economy.

Eurocentric, Chinocentric, Africanocentric - means nothing.

A great play that deals with the perennial concerns of man and woman - kind can come from anywhere , can be spoken with an accent from anywhere, and be played by actors and actresses of any colour- IT IS THE CONTENTS THAT MATTERS.

I look forward to hearing of such a performance in SA.